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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001173

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/12/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: TOP GOVERNMENT NEGOTIATORS REITERATE NO CHANGE IN
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION DATE

REF: A. DHAKA 1155
[1](#)B. DHAKA 1158

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Two leading Caretaker Government officials negotiating the terms of Parliamentary elections told the Ambassador on November 12 they would neither delay the vote scheduled for December 18 nor allow convicted politicians to run. The reiteration of Government position by Communications Adviser Maj. Gen. (retired) Ghulam Quader and Education Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman came amid great uncertainty over Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) demands for participating in the election. Both men expressed exasperation over mixed signals from the BNP over its bottom-line; Quader said he thought the party would likely boycott the vote because it simply was not ready. At the Ambassador's urging, the Advisers said they would seek an immediate meeting with BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia to clearly state the Government position and urge her to join the election. With the November 20 deadline for filing candidate nomination papers fast approaching, the BNP has no more than a few days to reach a decision.

GOVERNMENT STANDS FIRM ON ELECTION DATE

[1](#)2. (C) Advisers Quader and Zillur (Note: Advisers are akin to Cabinet ministers. End note.) told Ambassador Moriarty the Caretaker Government was determined to hold Parliamentary elections on December 18 as planned. Although the BNP did not include a delay in the vote among its formal demands for participating in the election, many party leaders and proxies have said a fair poll is impossible without a postponement. They have argued the party is a victim of Caretaker Government and Election Commission bias; therefore, the vote must be delayed until the BNP has a "level playing field" to compete with the Awami League, the other major party (the Awami League strongly supports elections). Among the BNP's formal demands is immediately lifting the State of Emergency rule that forbids convicts -- including several score leading BNP politicians found guilty of corruption -- from running for Parliament. The two advisers, however, said that ban will remain or else the Caretaker Government's anti-corruption campaign would lose all credibility.

WHAT DOES THE BNP WANT?

13. (S/NF) Zillur expressed frustration over Khaleda Zia's failure to indicate her bottom-line demands. He gave four possible explanations: She was determined to be a spoiler and boycott the elections; she was playing a game of brinkmanship to wring maximum concessions from the government; she was in the midst of finalizing her negotiating position; or, she was uncertain about what to do. Many BNP leaders contacted by Embassy officers in recent days suggested indecisiveness was the reason behind the lack of clarity of what the party really wanted. The two advisers acknowledged they had not met with Zia in recent days, leaving negotiations to the military's Directorate General Forces Intelligence (DGFI). At the Ambassador's urging, they agreed to seek an immediate meeting with Zia to clearly state the Government's position and urge her to participate in the elections. (Note: The Ambassador said it was particularly unwise to leave political negotiations in the hands of Gen. ATM Amin, the former director of DGFI's Counterterrorism Bureau. The Ambassador noted that Awami League President Sheikh Hasina had expressed to him personally her distrust of Gen. Amin and his motives. End note.)

14. (C) Recent conversations with BNP leaders suggest there may be flexibility in at least a few party demands. Although some BNP insiders have suggested delaying the elections until February, the party has not raised this demand publicly. At least unofficially, some preparations are underway to participate in December 18 elections should Zia give a final go-ahead. (Note: The advisers may be a bit flexible, too. An Embassy source close to the Awami League told us that later in the day Zillur asked him to get the party's reaction to a

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proposal that included delaying the elections until December 18. End note.) The BNP also may be flexible in its demand that convicted party leaders receive permission to run for Parliament. Party Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan told PolOff on 11/10 that Zia asked him to come up with a list of alternative candidates for constituencies formerly represented by BNP politicians in jail on corruption convictions. Zia Adviser Hannan Shah ran through some scenarios under which the party might contest the election even if the convicts remained barred from running. Still, several close advisers to Zia insisted the ban on convict candidates was designed to disadvantage the BNP and continued to demand it be lifted.

WHAT IF THE BNP BOYCOTTS?

15. (C) Quader told the Ambassador he believed the BNP ultimately would boycott the election because it simply was not ready. Under that scenario, Quader opined, many BNP reformists would break with Zia and run for Parliament allied with other smaller parties, thereby sundering the BNP and greatly diminishing her political clout. The advisers acknowledged they did not know whether Zia loyalists would take to the streets to violently disrupt the campaign should the party boycott. The Ambassador noted that public opinion polling suggested most Bangladeshis would ignore a major-party boycott and vote.

16. (C) A boycott also would place the BNP alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islami in a difficult position, Quader continued. The Islamist party desperately wanted to remain part of the democratic process and had made clear it wanted the BNP's four-party alliance to contest the election. If the BNP boycotted, the Awami League should do what it can to keep Jamaat engaged in the democratic process, Quader said. One option for the Awami League would be to refrain from challenging strong Jamaat candidates to ensure Jamaat won at least a few seats in Parliament.

COMMENT: TIME TO DECIDE

17. (C) The advisers stressed the Caretaker Government and its military supporters would not back down from holding elections December 18. That means the BNP must decide within a matter of a few days whether to participate. Embassy officers have met with virtually all leading BNP officials this week to urge participation, and the Ambassador is seeking a meeting with Zia to stress the case against a boycott. Whatever the BNP decision, the Embassy will continue to support the election timetable and to insist the Government do everything it can to ensure a free, fair and credible vote.

Moriarty